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ABSTRACT

This report, the second annual report of the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) system's current 5-year contract, shows the progress laboratories have made in meeting regional challenges and establishing national leadership in critical areas. The report also illustrates who the labs are using research and development to gain knowledge about how to stimulate learning, improve educational systems, and change policies and practices for the better. Following an introduction, the report opens with "Meeting Regional challenges—Stories from the RELs," which outlines some of the initiatives of the RELs. The focus of their work ranges from designing professional development strategies to aligning classroom instruction with state standards and assessments, to investigating such specific concerns as interstate teacher certification, compensation, and pension portability. The RELs do more than address education reform in their own geographic regions. Each REL focuses on a national leadership area in which the laboratory synthesizes knowledge and findings from major research and development activities. A section on "National Leadership Areas" describes the activities and accomplishments of each of the 10 RELs in its particular area. In addition, all 10 laboratories collaborate in a network that serves as a national resource for educators. A final section describes the REL data collection efforts aimed at capturing knowledge about progress toward turning low-performing schools into high performers. (SLD)

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# Improving the Lives of Children Through Education Research & Development

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## 2002

## REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL LABORATORIES

## ANNUAL REPORT



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# Shaping tomorrow's schools through research and development today

The failure to improve student performance is no longer an option. Nearly 20 years of increasing pressure to hold schools and districts accountable for student achievement has culminated in a federal mandate carrying tough new consequences for school systems that don't improve teaching and learning.

This increased pressure on schools, districts, and states can exacerbate broad, systemic problems in the field of education—such as a short supply of highly qualified teachers and leaders and limited financial resources. Change for these systems can be difficult, as a wide range of factors affect whether students are prepared to perform to high standards. Policies, educator knowledge, teaching practices, and wide diversity in student needs all profoundly influence educational outcomes.

Faced with these daunting challenges in public education, policymakers and educators have increasingly turned to education research and development (R&D) for knowledge about how to improve schools, increase learning, and apply effective practices, as well as for guidance about how to get these practices to take hold, develop, and flourish. The federal network of 10 Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs) has a history of engaging in precisely this kind of problem-based research and development focused on improving schools in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, the Pacific Island Territories, the Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico.

Through working intensively with struggling schools and using the best strategies and methods available to address a full range of educational challenges, the RELs understand that schools need to know not just what but how to improve. Both individually and as a network, the labs work to understand and cultivate high performance across the nation's schools.

**RELs make progress toward school reform**

This, the second annual report of the REL system's current five-year contract, shows the progress labs have made in meeting regional challenges and establishing national leadership in critical areas. In addition, this report illustrates how the labs are using R&D to gain knowledge about how to stimulate learning, improve educational systems, and change policies and practices for the better.

REL researchers, for instance, are studying how to make schools smaller so learning can be more personalized for students. Others are working with faith groups and community members to close

student achievement gaps between ethnic groups or are developing a framework for rural educators to help teenagers increase their literacy levels.

Alongside ongoing research to improve student learning, RELs are studying ways to support teachers. The focus of their work ranges from designing professional development strategies to aligning classroom instruction with state standards and assessments, to investigating such specific concerns as interstate teacher certification, compensation, and pension portability. Stories of this work and more are told throughout the following pages.

Collaborating as a network to share new and emerging knowledge about school improvement, the RELs move beyond their regional impact to play a key role in federal education efforts. Using technology and other media, the labs synthesize their research results and compile resources designed to engage educators and policymakers across the nation. And with a history of working to improve the most challenging problems in public education through close partnerships with state and regional constituents, the RELs are poised to advance work on the priorities outlined in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (see ESEA sidebar).

Over the past year, the RELs have combined regional, state, and local knowledge with expertise in facilitating and evaluating change in real educational settings. In their work with schools, districts, and states, they conduct sustained research and development, and draw upon the work of other organizations that also conduct educational R&D, to provide teachers, administrators, community members, and policymakers with a sound basis for their decisions about education reform. Based on what they learn, the RELs work with their regional constituents

# NCLB: The New ESEA

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) originally came on the scene in 1965 as a federal law governing K-12 education and was recently reauthorized by President Bush as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. As a recent article in *Education Week* states:

> *The No Child Left Behind Act is expected to greatly expand the federal role in education. Coming at a time of wide public concern about the state of education, the legislation sets in place requirements that will reach into virtually every public school in America. At the core of the NCLB Act are a number of measures designed to drive broad gains in student achievement and to hold states and schools more accountable for student progress. They represent potentially significant changes in the education landscape.*

Some of these measures include the following:[1]

**Annual testing.** By the 2005-06 school year, states must begin testing third through eighth graders annually in reading and math; states may select and design their own assessments as long as the tests are aligned with state academic standards.

**Academic progress.** States must bring all students up to the "proficient" level on state tests within 12 years. Individual schools must meet "adequate yearly progress" targets toward this goal for both their student populations as a whole and for certain demographic subgroups.

**Report cards.** States must furnish annual report cards that include statewide student-achievement data broken down by subgroup. Districts must provide similar report cards showing school-by-school data.

**Teacher qualifications.** Every public school teacher must be rated "highly qualified" within three years. Under the law, "highly qualified" generally means that a teacher is certified and demonstrably proficient in his or her subject matter.

**Reading First.** This new competitive-grant program will help states and districts set up scientific, research-based reading programs for children in grades K-3; a smaller early reading program will help states similarly prepare 3- to 5-year-olds in disadvantaged areas.

**Funding changes.** The act is expected to better target resources to school districts with high concentrations of poor children. The law also includes provisions intended to give states and districts greater flexibility in how they spend a portion of their federal allotments.

[1] As first appeared on *Education Week*'s Web site on August 9, 2002. Excerpts are reprinted with permission.

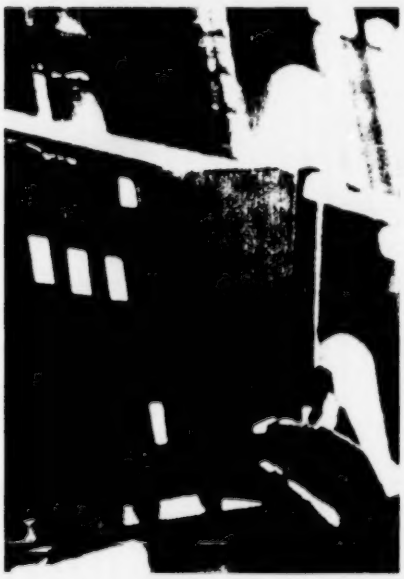
to apply knowledge, adapt program and policy alternatives, and develop products that are based on current research about how to improve schools, teaching, and learning.

As this report shows, it is this combination of expertise that gives the Regional Educational Laboratories their ability to respond to the needs that increased attention to standards and accountability force educators to confront: needs for new, sound knowledge about how to improve education systems so that schools throughout the country are both excellent and equitable.

**References**

No Child Left Behind. *Education Week on the Web* (2002, August 9). Retrieved August 21, 2002, from www.edweek.org/context/topics/issuespage.cfm?id=59.

# Meeting regional challenges



## STORIES FROM THE REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL LABORATORIES

The stories and tables that follow represent the regional challenges each REL identified as most pressing at the beginning of its five-year contract. The stories illustrate how the laboratories have worked with regional constituents on issues that have both local and national significance. The tables accompanying each story provide a quick overview of the range of progress made on these and other regional challenges over the past year.

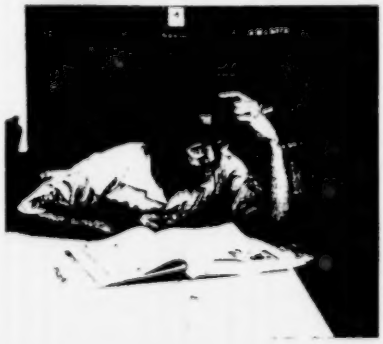
Although the laboratories are only completing their second year of work under this contract, they have been able to advance specific intensive projects by applying accumulated local knowledge, studying adaptations and use of knowledge and effective practice, and drawing upon well-established regional alliances and networks. As a result, labs have made comprehensive progress toward improving teaching and learning across the nation's schools.

# Data, Support, and Connections: Keys to Community- and Faith-Based Efforts to Boost Student Achievement

The Regional Educational Laboratory at AEL

An awakening. That's how the superintendent describes events that unfolded after the Office of Civil Rights cited his West Virginia district for having too many African American students in special education classes and too few in gifted programs. Those events brought district personnel and community members face-to-face with one another—and with the minority achievement gap. The Regional Educational Laboratory at AEL is helping the school district act on research about "what works" as it collaborates with community members and faith-based organizations to close this gap.

When the citation was issued, AEL was meeting with a local partnership of African American churches interested in supporting the academic achievement of high-risk and at-risk youth. District personnel called AEL and the churches, seeking the "minority perspective" on placement issues. The church leaders' response: Minority overrepresentation in special education was likely rooted in the quality of education many African American children receive in regular education classes. AEL urged the district to examine data from multiple sources, analyze them by race, and develop a comprehensive solution. The superintendent agreed, and the district analyzed enrollment and graduation records, ACT High School Profile reports, and Stanford-9 Achievement Test reports for grades 3 through 11.



### Test scores spur a community to action

The findings were a wake-up call to everyone. On average, African American children—12% of the district's students, mostly clustered in a few schools—scored lower on standardized tests, took fewer advanced courses, were disciplined at a higher rate, and were less likely to graduate and attend college than their white counterparts. The 2001 Stanford-9 Achievement Test results showed that 38.5% of the district's African American children, and 61.5% of the white children, were reading at or above the 50th percentile. African American males scored the lowest. In mathematics, 49.8% of African American students, and 69.5% of white students, were at or above the 50th percentile.

Because community participation is particularly critical for children whose cultures are inadequately reflected in schools, AEL arranged for school and district leaders to meet with African American educators, faith community leaders, and parents to discuss and learn from research how to maximize the achievement of African American children. (For an overview of related research, see *Racial Inequity in Special Education*, published in 2002 by Harvard Education Press.) When the group named itself the MAACK (Maximizing Achievement of African American Children in Kanawha County), members avoided the term *achievement gap*, contending that accepting the majority's achievement level as the standard was a disservice to minority *and* majority students. "The group's attitude was that we should all be asking *where's*

*the ceiling*, not *can we reach this particular bar?*" says AEL senior research and development specialist Patricia Kusimo.

The MAACK is open to all community members. "People continue to come to monthly meetings because there is easy access to school and district people," says Kusimo. In fact, AEL's role as "bridge builder" has been just as important as the research perspective it brings to school-community work. "We are optimistic that the superintendent means business," says one local pastor. "We have no intention of relenting until we see improvement. This is a historic opportunity."

The pastor's comment echoes the sentiments of others who welcome the opportunity to tie faith-based efforts to district and community actions focused on academics. "Many faith-based groups involve their members in tutoring and mentoring, and sponsor youth development programs," says Kusimo, who tutors math with her husband through a local church program. "But there is not always collaboration, resource sharing, or a strong academic mission. The MAACK offers a way to make these things happen." The focus of after-school programs has shifted to include more academic support, and enrollment has increased dramatically.

### Collaborating to close the achievement gap

"I knew the MAACK was doing something right when I heard substantive conversations across races," says AEL research and development specialist Marian Keyes. During an early meeting, the topic of perceived differences between the schooling experiences of African American students and other children was raised by MAACK members. Although at times uncomfortable, these conversations have been instrumental and productive, resulting, in this case, in a student survey to capture perceived differences.

Six MAACK subcommittees are guided by characteristics common to schools with no achievement gap. Research has shown that such schools have: (1) increased understanding of the African American schooling experience, (2) focused on closing the achievement gap, (3) decreased African American placements in special education classes, (4) improved collaboration between special educators and families, (5) mobilized the African American community around education issues, and (6) developed school-community dialogue about racial issues.

The No Child Left Behind Act pushes schools to monitor student achievement by race and to close the gap by 2013. "The good news is that other school systems are successfully addressing the challenge," says Kusimo. "It can be done."

The Education Trust lists 4,500 American schools that are helping poor and minority students achieve at high levels (*Dispelling the Myth—Online*, http://64.224.125.0/dtm). The MAACK's goal is clear: Members want their schools on the list. And they want to keep everyone's eyes on the prize of maximizing student achievement now that new policies are helping these schools address the issues raised in the citation. AEL will study and identify successful elements of the group's effort so other schools can benefit from the MAACK experience.

## REGIONAL CHALLENGES IN EDUCATION: AEL'S KEY STRATEGIES AND SIGNS OF PROGRESS

**Problem: Lack of capacity of low-performing schools to transform themselves into high-performing learning communities.**

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Seek a more complete understanding of the causes and manifestations of low performance.** AEL convened researchers and education leaders at an international colloquium on sustainable school reform and published *What Works with Low-Performing Schools: A Review of Research*.

**Determine the role of outside consultants/facilitators in developing the capacity of low-performing schools.** AEL established the Regional Exchange Network for External Support Persons. Its members, who work directly with low-performing schools, plan to meet three times a year, reflect on what's working, and publish what they are learning.

**Problem: Barriers that prevent some teachers from delivering their personal best.**

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Engage universities in activities that increase their capacity to prepare teachers and leaders effectively.** Representatives of the AEL-Higher Education Co-Venture, which includes 15 research universities, are examining and describing administrator preparation in the region.

**Establish and study an alternative high school model.** AEL teamed with a school district and a university to create a New Collaborative School. A cohort of students has completed its first year, and a report on what has been learned is under way.

**Problem: Lack of vision and knowledge allowing schools and communities to work together.**

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Enhance proactive community relations.** AEL hosted forums to foster dialogue between African American community members and school system personnel.

**Work with faith-based organizations and communities to identify strategies that foster development of the whole child.** After data revealed a significant achievement gap in reading, AEL arranged several training opportunities for reading tutors who are associated with faith-based community programs.

**Problem: Limited policymaker access to reliable, R&D-based, state-specific information.**

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Deliver state-specific information to policymakers.** AEL partnered with a university-based organization to sponsor an annual education poll in one state; the partners are exploring opportunities to adapt and expand the poll to the region's three other states.

**Provide policy analysis and interpretation around specific issues.** Two policy briefs examined state and district efforts to improve low-performing schools. Two issues of *TransFormation* provided research summaries and policy recommendations for improving such schools.

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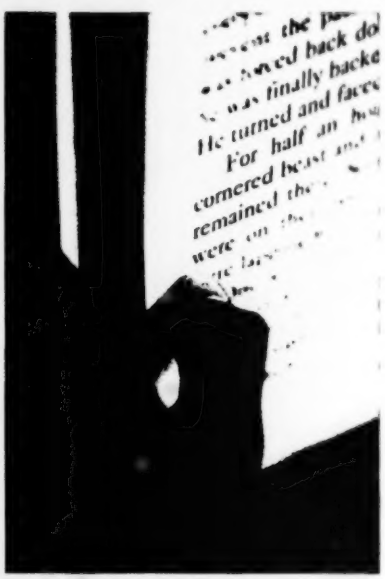
# Content Area Literacy: A Key to High School Reform

LAB

The Northeast & Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University

Literacy—the ability to read, write, and think effectively—enables teenagers to grapple with ideas, connect across space and time, and come to a better understanding of themselves and their world. Today's teens need stronger literacy skills than ever before, yet high school educators speak urgently about students with low levels of reading and writing proficiency, often lamenting that "students can only read at the fourth- and fifth-grade level." Businesses complain that high school graduates don't have the basic literacy skills necessary to make a living. And new statewide education standards lean heavily on literacy requirements, asking students to analyze, discuss, describe, and explain.



"Adolescent literacy has become a front-burner issue," states Karen Rumery, director of assessment and curriculum for Gorham Public Schools in Maine. "Literacy is a cross-cutting tool and we cannot allow our students to go forward without adequate grounding."

### Teaching teenagers to read and write

Concern over low literacy levels has prompted school districts throughout the region to start literacy initiatives in their high schools. As the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University (LAB) has advanced its broader work on student-centered learning at the secondary level, many schools have asked how they can bring content-based literacy instruction to the classroom in ways that will make a positive difference for their students.

"If teachers support literacy development when they teach content, students will learn a lot more," says Julie Meltzer, senior research associate at LAB partner organization, The Center for Resource Management (CRM). But high school teachers have historically lacked training in how to teach reading and writing, and most do not see literacy support as part of their job.

"For years we have just assumed that the English teacher would take care of everything," says Rumery, "but content-area teachers need to play a role, too. We need to include adolescent literacy practice in their preparation."

To aid teachers and schools in beginning this work, the LAB developed the Adolescent Literacy Support Framework, a diagnostic tool to help school leaders identify how to initiate improvement. The framework is drawn from research on reading comprehension, motivation, school reform, and second language acquisition.

Meltzer notes that the framework emphasizes four keys to adolescent literacy improvement:

- **Motivation**—Relevance to social and emotional needs of adolescents
- **Research-Based Strategies**—Reliance on proven strategies and techniques
- **Across the Curriculum**—Reading and writing in all content areas
- **Organizational Support**—Leadership capacity to ensure necessary support, sustainability, and focus

Two resources keyed to this framework have been developed for teachers: the Adolescent Literacy in the Content Areas Spotlight on The Knowledge Loom Web site (www.knowledgeloom.org/adlit) and *Adolescent Literacy Resources: Linking Research and Practice*, a research synthesis (www.lab.brown.edu/public/pubs/catalog.taf).

**Schools begin the work**

The Maine Department of Education recognized that literacy support is key to success on the state's standards and sought the LAB's help with improving literacy development. The LAB conducted workshops for Maine high schools and is working with the University of Maine to bring professional development opportunities to Maine educators. Over the next four years, the LAB and CRM will be piloting the Adolescent Literacy Support Framework in schools throughout Washington County, Maine.

"We are extremely interested in this project because we're realizing that adolescent literacy is really at the core of learning," says Betty Jordan, director of the Washington County Consortium for School Improvement.

One of the pilot schools, Jonesport-Beals High School in Jonesport, Maine, is a small, rural school of 104 students. The teachers feel they try to give their students a good foundation, yet they are also aware of a significant group of students they want to support much better; they believe that if it's not a schoolwide effort, it's not going to work.

"Most of my teachers have said that they weren't taught to teach reading when they were getting certified," says Jonesport-Beals principal, Colleen Haskell. "They assumed that by the time kids get to high school they know how to read. This project will help teachers learn strategies that they can use to teach reading and writing across the curriculum. If the bottom line is that the kids leave our high school with what they need for life, that's what I'm looking for."

With help from the LAB, the participating schools will learn what it takes to successfully develop literacy skills through content-area teaching and learning, an understanding that will benefit schools across the country. "This is broader than Washington County, Maine," says Jordan. "This is a national issue and concern."

Even so, there are few systemic secondary literacy initiatives in place anywhere in the country. The literacy work under way in Maine will provide procedural knowledge about how high schools can implement successful literacy programs, and the knowledge generated from this work will be available to other schools across the country.

"Students need more literacy skills because of today's technology, because they will be changing jobs, because the world is getting smaller," says Jordan. "This is an opportunity to provide those skills for the students so they are prepared, and so they can become quality lifelong learners."

**REGIONAL CHALLENGES IN EDUCATION: LAB'S KEY STRATEGIES AND SIGNS OF PROGRESS**

**Problem: Low academic achievement due to secondary school students' lack of engagement with learning.**

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Restructure schools to increase student engagement with learning.** After analyzing surveys and data from six area high schools, the LAB helped each school create a ninth-grade academy as the first phase of dividing into smaller learning communities.

**Improve adolescent literacy programs and policies.** The LAB created an online resource that supports four keys to a successful adolescent literacy initiative and is assessing its impact on student performance at eight rural high schools.

**Problem: Failure to improve teacher training, development, and nurturing.**

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Develop purposeful learning communities (PLCs) in low-performing schools.** The LAB coached four sites in developing purposeful learning communities and created profiles that capture the processes, supports, features, and effects of PLCs at each site.

**Cultivate collaborative professional development communities.** The LAB held online seminars for coaches of teachers using an innovative math curriculum and facilitated online study groups for teachers who were adopting standards-based instruction with their English language learners.

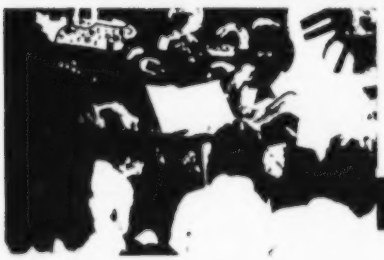
**Problem: Lack of multilevel leadership capacity to improve quality of instruction and student learning in low-performing schools.**

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Document what is working to improve low-performing schools in one state.** The LAB's site visits to low-performing schools resulted in a study that provided Connecticut with the baseline for second-year comparative analysis.

**Develop networks of educational leaders to facilitate peer collaboration and dissemination of research.** The Superintendents' Leadership Network and the Principals' Leadership Network held conferences and workshops and formed ongoing study groups.

# A Quality Teacher in Every Classroom



Laboratory for Student Success

There is universal agreement that every child in every classroom deserves an excellent teacher. Given current estimates of new teacher supply and demand, achieving this goal would seem to be automatic. Our nation's colleges will produce more than enough qualified teachers—over two million—to satisfy the employment demands of U. S. schools in the next decade. It is paradoxical, therefore, that many schools will nevertheless lack qualified teachers unless states work together. Providing every child with excellent teachers depends on networks of states dealing with issues of regional supply and retention.

Ensuring a supply of well-trained, effective teachers is a critical issue; it concerns teacher certification, compensation, and pension portability. Research confirms that many highly qualified and experienced teachers leave the profession prematurely because the present structure does not support contemporary mobility trends. Terry Dozier, National Teacher of the Year and currently National Teacher in Residence at Virginia Commonwealth University, confirms the frustration of many teachers with her own experience:

"When teachers are forced to move, there are no incentives for them to stay in the profession. Highly qualified and experienced teachers lose their pension benefits, are forced to jump through bureaucratic hoops to gain certification in a new state, and are often knocked down to the bottom of the pay scale. Despite being a former National Teacher of the Year with 19 years of classroom experience, in many states I would have to take, at my own expense, additional coursework or tests to prove that I am qualified to teach."

"The most important resource for any school district is effective teachers," states former teacher Nancy Doorey. "As the shortage grows, districts and states will either collaborate to ensure an adequate supply of qualified teachers, or will compete and, as in the past, poor districts and children will suffer the consequences." Doorey is a member of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Teachers Project (MARTP), a collaboration designed to resolve issues concerning teacher quality, supply, and credentialing in the mid-Atlantic region, and ultimately, across the country.

Established three years ago after the Laboratory for Student Success (LSS) brought together representatives from the jurisdictions in the mid-Atlantic region (Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and the District of Columbia), MARTP is now a vital, ongoing initiative, co-managed by LSS, the Council for Basic Education (CBE), and the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE).

### A regional perspective on quality teaching

A major LSS focus for MARTP has been the collection and analysis of data that profile the region's teacher supply and demand. For example, the data reveal that Maryland imports one half of its teachers, while Pennsylvania produces many more teachers than it can hire—clearly a regional problem of credential portability.

MARTP has, in addition, accumulated an impressive amount of information on other issues crucial to attracting and retaining quality teachers. The analysis of these data has resulted in a number of reports intended to help guide educational policy, including *Steps Toward Data-Driven Policy: A Profile of Teacher Supply and Demand Data in the Mid-Atlantic Region, Removing Pension Barriers to Teacher Mobility in the Mid-Atlantic Region, Ensuring Teacher Quality and Supply in the Mid-Atlantic Region, Teacher Demand and Supply Projections for the Mid-Atlantic Region: A Macro Approach,* and *A Quality Teacher in Every Classroom: Best Practices for Attracting and Recruiting Prospective Teachers.* The full text of these publications and other reports, including a regional educational fact profile, are available online through the MARTP Web site at www.c-b-e.org/martp.

### Next steps for MARTP

LSS has created a rich, professional development network for encouraging and supporting intraregional collaboration and collegial discussion on important issues of teacher quality and supply. MARTP provides a forum where policymakers can consider issues from a regional perspective and acquire accurate data to inform policy decisions that will enhance the region's ability to attract and retain high-quality teachers. Consideration has not been limited to existing topics, but has also included innovative ideas, such as the creation of "electronic hiring halls," a "meritorious teacher distinction," and a region-wide, common teaching certificate.

Providing a common source of knowledge for the mid-Atlantic region, MARTP has quickly established itself as a crucial forum for dealing with issues of teacher quality. Nancy Grasmick, Maryland state superintendent of schools, says, "The MARTP lens allows us to think regionally in state matters, which is important because we are no more than 40 miles from an adjacent state no matter where we stand in Maryland. We now routinely compare policy change considerations to the regulations and policies of other LSS states."

"MARTP will continue to be forward-looking because we cannot afford to be otherwise," states JoAnn Manning, executive director of LSS. "If we lose one good teacher because of policies that don't make sense, it is one too many. MARTP can provide the opportunity to help ensure an excellent teacher in every student's classroom."

## REGIONAL CHALLENGES IN EDUCATION: LSS'S KEY STRATEGIES AND SIGNS OF PROGRESS

**Problem: Failure of schools to use technology hardware for effective teaching and learning.**

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Foster effective integration of technology into K–12 teaching and learning.** LSS supported four schools in integrating technology into their classrooms and developed useful guides for decision makers.

**Support teachers and teams in their implementation of educational technologies.** LSS provided ongoing professional development in assessment, design, integration, and evaluation to support ongoing technology integration and access to research-based resources.

**Problem: Shortage of well-trained and qualified teachers due to geographic and licensing barriers that prevent teachers from reaching the schools that need them most.**

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Develop a regional database comparing/contrasting states with regard to licensing, recruitment, and certification practices.** LSS and the Mid-Atlantic Regional Teachers Project (MARTP) are working to formulate policies and an electronic job bank that both support an intensive common approach to these issues and remove barriers that relate to teacher supply.

**Problem: Insufficient information available to school leaders on building and sustaining comprehensive school improvement efforts.**

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Provide research-based information on what works to institute and support reform in specific school situations.** LSS completed, for wide dissemination, a report and accompanying tape on how six school districts became high achieving.

**Provide professional development to help build capacity in the lowest performing schools in the region.** LSS collaborated with a state department in providing ongoing professional development to leadership teams from 12 low-performing school districts.

**Problem: Insufficient and ineffective communication among schools, parents, and community agencies on common problems and solutions.**

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Share lessons learned about policies and practices that lead to viable local partnerships.** LSS and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) established an information network through the newly developed Mid-Atlantic Early Childhood Education Network (MECEN).



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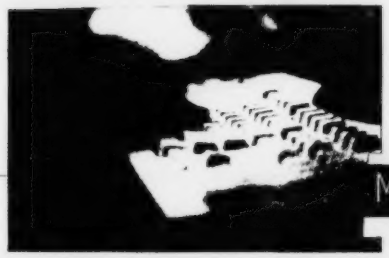
# McREL Technology Solutions: Connecting Teachers with Technology



Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning

Gone are the days when students carefully hand-lettered overhead slides for class presentations. Today, many students are as familiar with PowerPoint as their parents were with transparencies and markers. This increased emphasis on technology—in education, in the workplace, and often in the home—poses a unique challenge for many schools. Not only do educators need to be well-versed in technology skills and applications, but they also need to know how best to apply them to their current teaching methods—which can be two very different things, according to Kathy Brabec, senior technology consultant at McREL. "Even when new teachers enter the classroom with strong technology skills, they're often too busy learning general classroom management skills to really put them to good use. Veteran teachers, on the other hand, may know the classroom inside and out, but may still need help with those basic technology skills."

Enter the McREL Technology Initiative (MTI). Operating on the premise that teachers are the key to increased student achievement, McREL sought to develop a comprehensive solution to teachers' technology needs. McREL has initiated school technology audits, workshops, mentoring, and technical assistance to help teachers make the most effective use of technology in their classrooms.

### Meeting the needs of individual schools

The MTI was launched in 1999 at three pilot sites in South Dakota, Colorado, and Wyoming. In 2001, three additional pilot sites in Missouri, Kansas, and Nebraska were selected. Among other criteria, pilot sites were chosen based on the school's existing technology infrastructure, personnel availability, and staff and student characteristics.

McREL staffers began work at each of these field sites by administering pre-implementation surveys to teachers as part of an overall school technology audit. The surveys asked teachers to report their level of technology proficiency, amount of technology use, and comfort level in using technology, as well as their assessment of their students' use of technology.

McREL's next step was to develop school action plans with each district participating in the initiative. The plans took into account data culled from teacher and administrator interviews, a review of each district's existing technology plan, district hardware and software inventories, and district technology goals. "One of the great things about the MTI is that we're learning to customize solutions," notes Brabec. "We tailor our approach to meet the needs of individual schools."

To that end, the MTI is growing into a broader initiative, which McREL has dubbed McREL Technology Solutions (MTS). Under the MTS umbrella, McREL offers up to 12 individual workshop sessions, grouped in the categories of technology management, technology in the classroom, and technology training (including basic computer skills training). Schools can choose the training strategies that work best for them, whether these focus solely on mentoring or workshops, or on a combination of both.

### Peer-to-peer learning grows through mentoring programs

In addition to the workshops, a critical component of the MTS is the establishment of ongoing mentoring relationships and leadership guidance, through which program participants share

what they've learned with their colleagues. And that, according to Mary Kay Lindh, a media specialist at Marquette Elementary School in Marquette, Kansas, can be invaluable. "This program has really had a snowball effect in the district. Teachers have come up with some great projects that have spread throughout the entire school. At the district level, we have a group that collaborates on projects on a regular basis."

Lindh, a mentor at one of the field sites, notes that Marquette Elementary School students and teachers alike have been tremendously enthusiastic about the changes the program has brought to the school. Teachers in the school are always on the lookout for new ways to integrate technology into their existing lesson plans—for example, by having students use software and online tools, rather than markers and paper, to create posters for their class reports. Now Lindh scans illustrations from books to use during book presentations. "It's much easier to scan and project images than to hold a book up in front of the class—and the kids in the back don't have to squint to see it!"

According to post-implementation surveys administered by McREL at the initial pilot sites, many of the initiative participants share Lindh's enthusiasm for the program. Using the same survey given in the pre-implementation phase of the program, teachers again assessed their levels of technology proficiency and comfort, time spent using technology, and students' use of technology. Of the teacher participants in the three initial pilot sites, 43% reported an increase in their technology proficiency following their participation in the program. Comfort levels and teachers' use of technology also increased significantly.

As technology continues to evolve, McREL expects its technology program and offerings to evolve as well. By helping teachers gain new knowledge and skills, McREL will continue to assist teachers in putting education technology to its best use.

## REGIONAL CHALLENGES IN EDUCATION: MCREL'S KEY STRATEGIES AND SIGNS OF PROGRESS

### Problem: Lack of capacity to use standards to reform classroom practice.

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Develop online curriculum units that address multiple standards.** McREL has developed an initial set of criteria for judging the quality of curriculum units that teach to multiple standards.

**Research effective standards-based classrooms in high-performing, high-needs schools.** McREL published *Teachers' Perspectives on Standards-Based Education: Initial Findings from a High-Performing, High-Needs School District*, a study that examines teachers' and principals' beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge about key aspects of standards-based education.

### Problem: Declining availability of quality teachers.

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Identify necessary elements that prepare teachers to be effective in standards-based classrooms.** Through a program of training and professional development, McREL helped expand the capacity of North Dakota school leaders in curriculum alignment, instruction, and staff development.

**Study the impact of state policies on teacher quality and availability.** McREL's research on teacher quality in Wyoming has resulted in *Teacher Supply and Demand in the State of Wyoming*, a report that analyzes the status of teacher supply and demand in Wyoming and forecasts future trends for the state.

### Problem: Lack of leadership capacity to build high-performing learning systems.

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Create networks of urban leaders, rural educators, and chief state school officers to share best practices.** McREL convenes regular meetings of the region's chief state school officers and other selected educator groups to discuss education issues of statewide and regional importance, share lessons learned, and support problem solving.

**Create online resources to address needs of rural schools.** McREL has launched County Road 1 (www.mcrel.org/resources/rural), a Web site offering links to publications, a monthly e-mail newsletter, and other electronic resources for rural educators.

### Problem: Failure to adequately support systemic school reform.

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Form consortia of low-performing schools to work together toward high performance.** McREL is working with a consortium of low-performing schools in South Dakota to develop usable school improvement plans.

**Develop and field-test a process for integrating technology into school curricula, thus fostering systemic reform.** Teachers field-testing McREL's professional development program for classroom technology implementation reported increased levels of technology proficiency, comfort/confidence in using technology, time spent using technology, and student use of technology in classroom-related work.



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# NCREL Helps Schools Prepare Teachers in the Digital Age

NCREL

North Central Regional Educational Laboratory

When faculty at a school in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, asked more than 1,000 people the question, "How do we effectively integrate technology to improve student performance?" the response was overwhelmingly the same: *Provide teachers with meaningful professional development opportunities.* This seemed to be the missing link between having computers in classrooms and enhanced student achievement—the district's teachers lacked the necessary experience to fully integrate technology into the curriculum.

In 1997, the school board in Chippewa Falls approved a three-year proposal to upgrade the technology infrastructure in the district's schools. The project was completed in June 2000, and not surprisingly, the board members wanted to know what they got for their investment. "Has the upgraded technology infrastructure allowed us to improve teaching and learning," they asked, "and ultimately yielded results?" The answer was no.

"After struggling with the question and looking at a variety of different ways to answer it—counting the materials we had bought and the amount we had spent, or determining how programs had been impacted—we stumbled upon the enGauge tool," says Jim Hadlock, district director of technology in Chippewa Falls. "enGauge enabled us to sharpen our focus on where we should put our training dollars."

NCREL designed enGauge to support educators in making good decisions about their investment in technology and to empower them to prepare students for today's knowledge-based digital society. This kind of support and empowerment involves transforming schools into high-performing learning communities that use twenty-first century skills such as digital age literacy skills and effective communication skills.

enGauge has both online and on-site components to help districts and schools assess and plan their educational technology effectiveness. Hadlock used the enGauge online surveys to poll nearly 1,200 individuals, including teachers, parents, students, and community members. "We found that teachers were pretty adept at using technology to do old things in new ways. For instance, a writing assignment would be word processed rather than written in long hand."

According to Hadlock, the district's greatest need was to provide training experiences for teachers on how to use the Internet in daily lessons. To fill this missing link, staff development has focused on learning how to use Web quest activities for focused teaching. For example, when teaching a lesson about space exploration, teachers can now direct students to the NASA Web site where they can read interviews with astronauts and explore the solar system online.

### The enGauge framework

The online component of enGauge is a Web-based framework (www.ncrel.org/enGauge) that describes the following six essential conditions for effective technology use that are present in high-performing schools:

- ❑ Forward-thinking, shared vision
- ❑ Educator proficiency with effective teaching and learning practices
- ❑ Digital-age equity
- ❑ Effective teaching and learning practice
- ❑ Robust access anywhere, anytime
- ❑ Systems and leadership

Schools use the conditions as benchmarks to rate their current school environment through an online survey of stakeholders, including superintendents, school board members, principals, teachers, technology coordinators, parents, students, and community members. After the survey data are collected, they are analyzed and formatted into useable "profiles" that give districts a clear picture of where they are on the technology continuum.

The second component of enGauge, on-site peer review, was developed in collaboration with the North Central Regional Technology in Education Consortium (NCRTEC). Using the essential conditions as benchmarks, leadership teams from two schools or districts review each other's curriculum and technology plans, staff development opportunities, student work, and relevant policies and procedures. They conduct interviews and focus groups with representative teachers, technology coordinators, students, library/media specialists, administrators, parents, and school board and community members. They also make observations about the building and its capacity. After the information is collected, the team assembles a final report based on the enGauge indicators using information from both the online surveys and the on-site visits and observations.

### Improvements and expansions

NCREL has continued to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of enGauge since its launch two years ago. New content has been added, surveys have been revised for better usability, and new school and project profile formats have been developed. NCREL's partners in the state agencies, intermediate service providers, and universities have been invaluable in its development and improvement. "They talk—we listen—and the result has been beneficial for districts and ultimately students," says Kristin Ciesemier, NCRTEC program director.

NCREL staff is currently developing a simulated online school to help train on-site review teams. "Most district teams involved in the on-site peer review process have never done data collection. The simulated online school is a way to let them practice making real decisions, with real data, before it affects real people," says Paul Betts, NCRTEC program associate. Teams practice data collection with information from an actual school, including a videotaped interview, real artifacts (technology plan and school Web site), and a video walk-through of the building.

Frequent requests for online data collection and on-site peer reviews are an indication of the practicality and accessibility of enGauge. To date, nearly 400 schools and districts have used enGauge. Hundreds more are expected to complete the enGauge program in the next year.

### REGIONAL CHALLENGES IN EDUCATION: NCREL'S KEY STRATEGIES AND SIGNS OF PROGRESS

**Problem: Too many educators lack the procedural knowledge and support required to integrate technology into teaching and learning with the goal of improved student outcomes.**

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Create high-quality educational technology products and services for educators.** NCREL launched the E-Learning Knowledge Base Web site (www.ncrel.org/tech/elearn) to provide access to current online learning information, and created the NETRO Web site (www.ncrel.org/tech) to provide quick, centralized access to the technology resources at NCREL.

**Extend the field's knowledge of how to use educational technology.** NCREL worked to raise awareness about online learning by synthesizing literature, publishing rubrics for online courses, and disseminating work plans for using online resources. In addition, several features were added to the enGauge Web site (www.ncrel.org/enGauge).

**Problem: Too many students, especially those in high-poverty and minority groups, are poor readers and writers.**

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Provide educators with tools and resources for daily use and expand knowledge about literacy education.** NCREL conducted research on the reading requirements for initial teacher certification and on the professional development of practicing reading teachers, and provided professional development about literacy instruction in low-performing schools.

**Provide a forum for key constituents to share and discuss knowledge, emergent issues, and ongoing research.** NCREL launched networks for education stakeholders to share literacy knowledge and recent research on top literacy issues in the region.

**Problem: Educators lack access to and the capacity to use high-quality, well-organized data about the performance, characteristics, and resources of students, educators, schools, and districts to inform their professional decisions.**

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Expand the knowledge base regarding access to and use of data for student and systemic performance.** NCREL developed four state-specific Web sites for disaggregated state assessment data, conducted several data retreats at the district and school level, and created a Web site of tools for use in data collection.

**Provide a forum for key constituents to share and discuss issues, research, policy, and solutions.** NCREL convened regional local networks, including the Vertical Learning Network on "Data Use Now and in the Future" in Madison, Wisconsin, attended by practitioners, policymakers, and researchers.


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# Taking It Step by Step: Helping Schools Assess Their Readiness for Change

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

While everyone agrees that schools need to improve student performance, little is known about how schools actually improve. Teachers in Northwest classrooms—909 of them to date—are learning about the "how" of school change as they work with Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) to develop a School Readiness for Reform assessment tool.

**Identifying problems**

Thirty schools in three states—Alaska, Idaho, and Washington—

participate in the readiness-for-reform effort. NWREL is helping them find specific answers to school improvement questions through measuring capacity to change and through identifying barriers to change. The schools help NWREL find the best measures that will tell schools what they need to know to achieve effective improvement.

School personnel directly participate in this assessment tool by going online, logging in, and answering a 109-question School Readiness for Reform survey. NWREL tabulates the results and displays the data. Each school is learning how to interpret the results. The tool helps schools see where they're strong and where there are opportunities for improvement. The research and development work involves validating and refining the initial indicators for usefulness and quality.

For several years, NWREL has been developing school profiling processes and support software to encourage planning teams to use information about their school to guide improvement efforts. The School Readiness for Reform tool is one of four instruments NWREL is developing to help schools use data in making key decisions. The others focus on Assessing Schools' Preparation for New and Diverse Students; Using Assessments to Guide Instruction; and Indicators of Instructional Change. One is being developed each year of the contract. They will be combined and disseminated in a culminating product in the fifth year after field testing and refinement.

**Overcoming barriers to reform**

Mount Tahoma High School, a NWREL partner with a student body of more than 1,400, is the smallest of five high schools in urban Tacoma, Washington. With need for improvement in student achievement, an impending move to a new building, and various resources at hand, Mount Tahoma seems poised for reform.

Barriers seem daunting—family problems, economic hardship, low expectations, student disinterest. It's an urban-school enumeration Mount Tahoma intends to make obsolete, marshalling research and resources to focus on action for

instructional improvement. Its student body features a rich mix of economic and ethnic diversity. About half are racial minorities, and approximately half of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

### Sharpening the focus

Last fall, Mount Tahoma staff began a readiness-for-change examination in 11 areas, identifying strengths to build on and weaknesses to target improvement:

- ❑ **Recognition of need**—to improve student learning and quality of school environment
- ❑ **Shared concern**—for quality of student learning as primary focus of school improvement and need for supportive, effective teaching to achieve improved student learning
- ❑ **Staff collaboration**

- ❑ **Personal commitment**—to reform, learn, and pursue new ideas and to work collaboratively to achieve reform
- ❑ **Community support**—for improved student learning
- ❑ **Strong management leadership**—to move the school forward and to advocate for the school
- ❑ **Potential curricular leadership**—to provide direction and encouragement to others
- ❑ **Sense of curriculum**—guides classroom teaching
- ❑ **High expectations for all students and teachers**—role of teaching and the school is to develop appropriate learning environments
- ❑ **Strong relationships**—between and among teachers, school administration, and community
- ❑ **Inclusiveness**—of all constituent groups in planning and monitoring school change efforts

### What Mount Tahoma learned

With survey data tabulated and displayed, NWREL coached Mount Tahoma in how to cross-validate, interpret, and use the information. The results, says Stuart Dodge, an advanced-placement history teacher and partner-site liaison, "really helped us." It confirmed strengths, such as a collegial staff who like working at Mount Tahoma and recognize the need for change.

"One of the things that came out in the survey, quite overwhelmingly," says Dodge, "is that teachers realize there is a need for change and indicated that they were willing to change. When you're comfortable doing what you've done for 20 years, and you have to change that, it takes a very strong person to recognize that need."

Concerning weaknesses, the assessment indicated strengthening community relations. That, says Dodge, is "a tough one that secondary schools struggle with, connecting with our community and parents. It came out fairly strongly in the survey that we need to identify ways to reach our community." With NWREL's team assisting, Mount Tahoma's staff plans to explore avenues for better surveying and collecting information from the community.

There's a sense of optimism at Mount Tahoma, Dodge says, and district administration has been supportive. "As time goes on, I see we're taking steps. I don't think it can be done all at once, so when you start to look at small changes that take place along the way, you begin to see that maybe it's not going to be as difficult to change the system. And maybe, by taking it step by step, we can do that."

### REGIONAL CHALLENGES IN EDUCATION: NWREL'S KEY STRATEGIES AND SIGNS OF PROGRESS

**Problem: Lack of schools' capacity to assess and re-engineer their rules, roles, structures, and relationships to improve learning for all students.**

#### STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS

**Provide tools and training encouraging effective use of data/information in developing high-performing learning communities.** NWREL conducted regional training institutes on assessment topics such as understanding alignment, instruction, curriculum, assessment, and state standards. Evaluation workshops, in collaboration with comprehensive assistance centers, helped participants to align evaluation questions for formative, summative, and impact evaluation; explored data-collection methods; and reported and used evaluation information to guide school improvement efforts.

**Provide research-based guides to assist stakeholders/change agents to work with all in improving schools.** NWREL developed *Moving Forward: From Where You Are To School Improvement That Lasts*, a product providing a solid foundation of knowledge, skills, and practices essential to achieving the goal of high achievement for all students, and a "toolbox" for achieving school improvement goals.

**Provide syntheses on current research topics to support school improvement.** NWREL developed *New Small Learning Communities: Findings From Recent Literature*, directed toward policymakers, administrators, teachers, parents, and others interested in the current state of small-schools research and findings, found online at: www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/nslc.pdf.



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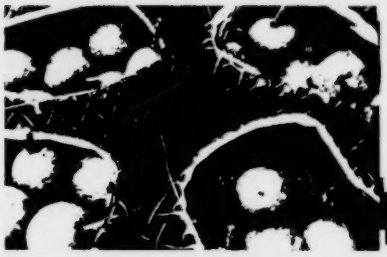
# PREL Improves Early Reading Instruction Through Professional Development



Pacific Resources for Education and Learning

Toward the end of the school year, a caring first-grade teacher focuses on decoding skills in early reading with his eager pupils. "I have really great students!" he exclaims as together they look at a picture of a seashell and generate vocabulary words associated with seashells. In the meantime, PREL's local reading specialist, Keres, and reading coordinator, Lee, who have been working with the staff at the school all year, look on with interest. Lee turns to Keres and says in English, "I think they're ready to start linking words together and creating sentences."

Nodding in agreement, Keres moves closer to the teacher and whispers this possibility to him in the local language and asks if they could demonstrate. Working as a team, Lee, Keres, and the teacher begin an interactive writing experience with the children, asking them to write these "strings of words" on the board. Prompted by questions from the team, they end up with a wonderful story about gathering seashells.

At lunch, the teacher smiles broadly and declares to the team, "I never thought my little first graders could do so much... creating sentences? I was amazed!" Keres mentions to the teacher that she will bring some real shells for the children tomorrow. The next morning Lee and Keres, seashells in hand, stroll by the classroom. They linger for just a moment at the doorway and notice that the children are animatedly creating sentences. There are several large breadfruit being passed from table to table and there is lively discussion among the students. The teacher waves and says to Keres in the local language, "The children are writing a story about how we use breadfruit locally." The teacher has moved from words to sentences and from a picture of a seashell to real breadfruit. Lee and Keres walk toward the classroom next door knowing they are on the right path.

**Reading is essential to learning**

"The problem of lack of reading ability, in either English or first languages, is so pervasive and so fundamental, it makes progress in student achievement almost impossible. There is no barrier to learning more critical than the inability to read," says Lee Noto, PREL's reading coordinator.

And, reading is a national priority. A firm foundation in reading provides students the potential for lifelong learning in a variety of disciplines. According to Reid Lyon (1998) of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, "Reading serves as the critical foundational skill for all school-based learning and without it, opportunities for academic and occupational success are limited."

In a study of teacher education and reading instruction recently released by the National Reading Panel (NRP, www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/nrp/ch5.pdf), the panel concluded, "Appropriate teacher education does produce higher achievement in students."

The results of the NRP study, among others, have convinced PREL that an important strategy to improve reading performance among students in the region is to improve the knowledge and skills of teachers who teach reading.

And so it is that the Pacific Communities with High-Performance in Literacy Development (CHILD) initiative, part of the work of the Regional Educational Laboratory at PREL, is serving as the catalyst for significant change in early reading instruction. PREL has placed a priority on hiring

local reading specialists and site facilitators who share the task of supporting school reform efforts and providing professional development in reading.

### A team approach improves reading instruction

The Pacific CHILD staff provides collaborative and research-based professional development that includes ongoing training, lesson modeling, teaming, coaching, and early reading assessment to intensive school sites (Co-Development Partner Schools) throughout the Pacific region. Pacific CHILD's local staff work in tandem with PREL's Hawaii-based reading, assessment, and school renewal specialists to deliver development, planning, training, and coaching activities focusing on the improvement of early reading achievement. "Teaming makes our work much more enjoyable and effective. I know the teachers benefit from having a team of people to work with," says Winton Clarence, the site facilitator in Kosrae.

Site-based staff convene the key players needed to ensure the success of the project. This may mean rallying community leaders such as village chiefs, the local church leadership, and/or various political bodies to encourage community participation and support. In addition to meeting regularly with the school faculty, local staff participate in Parent-Teacher Association meetings, engage Department of Ministry of Education personnel in conversations and activities related to the project, provide workshops on topics such as the school improvement process, and deliver informational presentations to the community.

PREL's site-based reading specialists (often in collaboration with Hawaii-based staff) provide in-depth training to teachers on reading and reading pedagogy. Many specialists hold weekly workshops on different components of effective reading strategies. They also assist teachers in lesson planning, model effective teaching practices, adapt the available reading series to align with national reading priorities, develop literacy materials in local languages, and help assess students.

Returning to our first-grade classroom a week later, Keres observes that the first-grade teacher from next door is sitting in the back of the classroom watching the teacher carry out an interactive writing activity with the class. She shares with Keres, "I heard that there were some great things happening right next door to me, so I came by to learn how to do the same thing with my first graders." Keres responds with a smile and a nod. In her quiet Pacific way, she acknowledges that the work she is doing is making a profound difference in the school and on her island.

### REGIONAL CHALLENGES IN EDUCATION: PREL'S KEY STRATEGIES AND SIGNS OF PROGRESS

**Problem: Teachers lack the necessary content knowledge and/or pedagogical skills to provide effective literacy instruction to their students.**

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Provide ongoing professional development to teachers and administrators at intensive school sites.** Site-based specialists provided daily and/or weekly assistance and support to teachers and administrators in reading and literacy-focused school improvement planning. Teachers learned and implemented research-based early reading practices and strategies.

**Provide support and assistance to local reading specialists and intensive school sites.** Hawaii-based reading specialists provided in-house training to PREL's local reading specialists and supported intensive school site staff on a monthly and/or quarterly basis.

**Problem: Schools lack adequate and/or appropriate assessment systems and accountability processes to improve students' reading achievement.**

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Develop early reading assessments in local languages and support teachers in administration and analysis.** Teachers at intensive school sites used early reading assessments to determine students' reading progress in local languages and to identify areas where more instruction is needed. Teachers began to modify their instruction based on assessment results.



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# Appropriate Reading Assessments Are a Click Away with SEDL's Database

SEDL

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory

A New Mexico principal tells the story of an American Indian kindergarten student at his school. When shown pictures of four common objects during an assessment of early reading skills, the child described the objects vividly without ever using the names of the objects. That the child was able to do so may have reflected the powerful oral tradition of his native language, *Keres*, and his fluency in that language. However, according to Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) program specialist Sebastian Wren, it may also have been a reflection of a poor assessment tool or one not suitable for that particular student.

Wren notes that while there are a variety of early reading assessments available, many are poor or inappropriate assessments. "Some don't support the cognitive elements related to learning to read," he explains. "Many measure skill levels completely unrelated to reading—for example, one assessment measures fine motor skills." He notes others measure skills that research has shown are not critical to learning to read, such as rhyming.

"The first step in improving reading instruction and increasing achievement is to find out what kids know and don't know. That means assessing kids on a number of cognitive elements, including comprehension, phoneme awareness, vocabulary, and decoding fluency," says Joan Buttram, SEDL executive vice-president and chief operating officer.

**SEDL's database meets regional and national needs**

To guide educators and technical assistance providers in their search for appropriate assessments, SEDL developed the Reading Assessment Database for grades K–2, found online at www.sedl.org/reading/rad. The database includes information about more than 150 assessments designed for young students. It offers essential information to educators deciding whether to use an assessment, including the cost of the assessment, how it is administered, cognitive elements supported by the assessment, and languages in which the assessment can be administered.

Debbie Smith, director of reading and literacy at the Oklahoma State Department of Education reports her office used the database when they created Oklahoma's State Approved Reading Sufficiency Assessment List, which is part of Oklahoma's Reading Sufficiency legislation. "The database was so helpful, because we had to choose assessments for K–3 and designate the specific areas that they assessed. Specifically, we looked at phoneme awareness, phonics, spelling, fluency, and comprehension," she says. "We asked all of our eligible districts that were writing a Read-

ing Excellence Act grant to utilize the database when addressing the assessment portion of the grant. In addition, we have a link for SEDL and the database from our state Web site."

Throughout the country, hundreds of educators, state agencies, and technical assistance providers are using SEDL's Reading Assessment Database on an ongoing basis—the site averages 3,000 hits each month.

### Knowing how and what to teach to strengthen reading

The searchable database is just one of the many research-based tools and strategies being used in SEDL's systemic work with schools and districts across the southwest region. As part of its Regional Educational Laboratory contract, SEDL and its partner, the Charles A. Dana Center, are

building the capacity of schools and districts to improve performance in reading and mathematics. Most of the schools with which SEDL and the Dana Center are working have chosen to focus on strengthening reading instruction as their first step in raising student achievement.

In the REL site work, SEDL staff are helping schools deliver more effective reading instruction by providing teachers with a background of the cognitive development that takes place as children learn to read, using *The Cognitive Foundations of Learning to Read: A Framework*. The framework was developed during the last REL contract, along with a collection of tools to help teachers acquire the expertise to strengthen instruction, administer assessments effectively, and use data to inform their instruction. Each school's progress will be measured by state achievement tests.

SEDL's Reading Assessment Database and Cognitive Foundations Framework work hand-in-hand to help schools increase reading achievement. "It is no surprise that the most effective teachers have a sound understanding of the relationship between assessment and instruction," says Buttram. "They have the ability to assess students' needs and are able to meet those needs with focused instruction that directly addresses the areas." As one reading support specialist recently reported, "We have a commitment to good assessment at my school, and to serving kids' diagnosed needs as best we can, so the database is a very helpful source for finding what we need. Our data show good growth for our students over the past two years, and the right assessments have helped us know what to teach."

## REGIONAL CHALLENGES IN EDUCATION: SEDL'S KEY STRATEGIES AND SIGNS OF PROGRESS

**Problem: Inability of low-performing schools to make significant, lasting improvements.**

#### STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS

**Develop improvement strategies and structures that create a culture for improvement and innovation.** SEDL helped 60 low-performing schools and districts complete extensive data scans and determine root causes of low achievement. Improvement strategies are being developed and tested to align assessment, instruction, and professional development in reading and mathematics.

**Create procedural knowledge for practitioners to direct the improvement process.** SEDL is maintaining comprehensive field notes on strategies used in schools and districts to identify and assess effective strategies for improving schools.

**Problem: Limited capacity/resources of states' technical assistance infrastructures to respond to low-performing schools and districts.**

#### STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS

**Build capacity of the technical assistance infrastructure to support the transformation of low-performing schools and districts.** Initial meetings with state-supported technical assistance providers were held to share information about SEDL's partnerships with low-performing districts and schools and the process of working systemically. Opportunities for joint work are being explored.

**Create and promote procedural knowledge enabling technical assistance providers to help practitioners develop and use strategies that guide the transformation process.** SEDL has created several tools for technical assistance providers, schools, and districts to use in conducting extensive data analysis, and is creating reading and mathematics toolkits.

**Problem: Limited research-based information on how low-performing schools and districts transform themselves into high-performing learning communities and how policymakers can facilitate improvement.**

#### STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS

**Conduct regional studies on critical policy issues.** SEDL collected data for a resource allocation study in districts in four states, and created a survey database.

**Create and promote procedural knowledge for policymakers to support the transformation process.** Two issue papers for policymakers have been distributed and two regional forums for policymakers were held regarding resource allocation, financial accountability and adequacy issues, and effective local practices.



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# Are Children Ready for School? SERVE Helps States Find the Answers

The Regional Educational Laboratory at SERVE

Each year as millions of children start kindergarten for the first time, parents, educators, and policymakers wonder, "Are they ready?" For years, nobody knew what characteristics and experiences children needed before they started school to prepare them for success. In 1999, then-Governor James B. Hunt and Superintendent of Public Instruction Michael Ward created a state-level task force to define school readiness for the state of North Carolina and to develop a strategy for measuring school readiness.

**School readiness is vital**

"Children can come to kindergarten with a level playing field because quality early childhood services can make up for experiences some of our at-risk children have missed," explains Kimberly Hughes, a pre-K/K teacher from Wake County, North Carolina. Children who are well prepared before they enter school are more likely to be successful when they get to school. Defining school readiness would provide a road map for educators and early care programs to follow toward improving readiness at their schools.

Known as the Ready for School Goal Team, the task force studied how other states had defined and measured school readiness. Together with the National Center for Early Development and Learning, SERVE conducted a national survey and found no state with a model definition or assessment system that fit North Carolina's needs. Catherine Scott-Little, SERVE's Expanded Learning Opportunities project director, notes, "Many states had invested significant funding and energy into preparing children for school, but no state had defined what they meant by *school readiness*."

The goal team started developing its own definition from a description of the skills and characteristics thought to improve children's chances for success in school. The group soon realized that school readiness was not just about children—*schools* play an important part in children's success through their capacity to serve all kindergartners effectively (e.g., personnel, policies, practices, and physical resources). North Carolina's definition of school readiness would have to include both expectations for children *and* expectations for schools.

Working with SERVE's early childhood staff, the goal team determined that school readiness in North Carolina is defined as:

1) The condition of children as they enter school, based on the following five developmental domains:

- ❑ Health and physical development
- ❑ Social and emotional development
- ❑ Approaches toward learning
- ❑ Language development and communication
- ❑ Cognition and general knowledge

2) The capacity of schools to serve all kindergartners effectively (e.g., personnel, policies, practices, and physical resources).

The goal team's report, *School Readiness in North Carolina: Strategies for Defining, Measuring, and Promoting Success for All Children*, was produced by SERVE, adopted by the North Carolina State Board of Education, and endorsed by the North Carolina Partnership for Children.

The next step was to develop a school readiness assessment system for the state.

### Measuring school readiness

Guided by the goal team's report, staff from the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center developed the North Carolina School Readiness Assessment (NC SRA) battery (see the NC School Readiness Assessment home page at www.fpg.unc.edu/~schoolreadiness). The goal team had specified that assessment should (a) be holistic, (b) be appropriate for 5-year-olds (i.e., not a pencil-and-paper test), and (c) address both children's readiness and schools' readiness.

The NC SRA was conducted for the first time in the fall of 2000. Data were collected from a representative sample of 1,034 kindergartners in 189 public schools across North Carolina. Results indicated that, overall, children in North Carolina were comparable to the national averages on measures for most of the five developmental domains. However, when the data were disaggregated, it was evident that children from lower income families (defined as qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches) entered school "behind" their peers from higher income families. They scored lower on all measures of school readiness. The achievement gap evident in later grades was actually evident at the beginning of children's school experiences.

As for the readiness of North Carolina's schools, the state's schools looked similar to national averages. The average kindergarten class size was 21 (above the class size of 18 recommended by the U.S. Department of Education). Although 95% of the teachers were licensed to teach kindergarten, only 11% held licenses that required extensive work in early childhood education. North Carolina schools have room for improvement to be ready to promote children's success in school.

### Improving school readiness in North Carolina

Armed with data from the NC SRA, North Carolina is taking steps to improve school readiness in the state. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction offered grants to schools to improve their readiness for children—funds to help kindergartens make improvements to meet the definition of a "ready school" as outlined in the goal team's report.

With the help of SERVE, the Department of Public Instruction is convening a task force to define standards for what children should have the opportunity to learn before they start school. According to Lucy Roberts, chief of the Early Childhood Division for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "These standards will enable teachers, families, and communities to provide experiences that promote children's success in the preschool years." Defined standards will serve to "level the playing field" for the state's children who are most at risk for later school failure.

## REGIONAL CHALLENGES IN EDUCATION: SERVE'S KEY STRATEGIES AND SIGNS OF PROGRESS

**Problem: Lack of system-wide processes to align curriculum, instruction, and assessment with state standards.**

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Develop district leadership teams to improve the quality of learning experiences provided by teachers.** Fifteen districts meet regularly to explore strategies to improve teachers' ability to create, implement, and assess high-quality assignments.

**Provide tools and support to help low-performing schools use data more effectively.** SERVE has developed and conducted training on how to create learning teams, how to look at student work, and how to use best practices in data-driven implementation.

**Problem: Shortages of qualified early care and education providers, teachers, and administrators.**

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Develop a teacher evaluation model to use as a vehicle for improving teacher quality.** SERVE's teacher evaluation model has completed the first year of implementation in 17 districts, resulting in procedural knowledge about the role of teacher evaluation in improving teacher practice.

**Provide a graduate-level distance education course for early childhood education community college instructors.** SERVE pilot-tested a graduate course for community college instructors to improve their knowledge of early childhood research and their ability to provide quality instruction to their students.

**Problem: Reading achievement in the six SERVE states is below expectations and varies according to economic and minority status of students.**

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Develop job-embedded learning opportunities for teachers to build their capacity to assess struggling readers.** SERVE has field-tested a professional development program on reading assessment with teachers from low-performing middle schools.

**Problem: Decision makers need objective and accurate information to guide the creation and implementation of education policy.**

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Conduct a review and analysis of the South Carolina Readiness Assessment system.** SERVE's review of the South Carolina Readiness Assessment system resulted in recommendations for policymakers about how to revise the administration practices and use of data.

**Determine the nature of the achievement gap in North Carolina and help decision makers develop strategies for closing the gap.** A task force is examining the nature of the achievement gap and has developed a number of reports for the state education agency to inform statewide policy related to achievement gap issues.



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# Creating Statewide Accountability Systems that Work

WestEd

WestEd

No matter how dedicated and hardworking their teachers, students cannot achieve to higher academic standards if the system those teachers operate in lacks coherence—if, for example, school district curricula are out of sync with state content standards, or if high-stakes tests measure skills that aren't being taught in the classroom.

To help states build accountability systems that efficiently align standards, instruction, and assessments, WestEd is working intensively with state chiefs, boards, and legislatures to shape policy agendas and grapple with tough implementation issues.

**Arizona aims for better assessment program**

In Arizona, where a statewide task force declared that teachers and administrators are "trapped in a dysfunctional system" resulting in low student achievement, WestEd is helping state-level leaders forge a standards-based accountability system that really works. The state recently created a testing system—Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS)—around rigorous content standards for what its students should know and be able to do, slated for use as a graduation requirement in 2002. The program immediately ran into trouble. Administered to high school students, the scores were shockingly low, especially in math.

"What didn't happen across the board was curricular change," says Paul Koehler, WestEd's director of policy. "In at least half the schools, curricula and instruction were not aligned to the Arizona Academic Standards. Amid a tide of public criticism about the timeliness, accuracy, and fairness of the AIMS testing, some schools held off implementing the program."

WestEd's involvement began when every teacher, district superintendent, and board member in the state was surveyed about what it would take to make the AIMS program work. Brought in by the state superintendent as a credible outside resource, WestEd analyzed the statewide survey data and then gathered further public input by conducting town-hall forums in Phoenix, Tucson, and Flagstaff.

"A host of concerns emerged," says Koehler, "much like those in the surveys: more time needed for kids to learn the content; reliability concerns, especially about the math; whether a single test should be the sole determinant for a diploma; and concerns about equity and remediation."

Based on the survey and public forum results, WestEd delivered a series of recommendations to the state board of education, including delaying AIMS to permit aligning curriculum and instruction, training principals and teachers in using

standards and assessments, and exploring alternative measures. These recommendations were instrumental in changing the debate from "whether to eliminate" the state test to "how to use it well." WestEd's report was soon widely viewed as the state's "blueprint" for systems development in the future.

### Forging new policies with state-level leaders

Stanley Rabinowitz, WestEd's director of assessment and standards development services, helped sort out technical issues embedded in the new AIMS program, developing criteria for accountability formulas. But beyond technical assistance, WestEd was able to help slow down a decision-making process some characterized as 'spinning out of control," enabling the state department and board to gain a clearer sense of the problem, work through the issues, and look at alternative strategies.

"WestEd galvanized assessment issues through the use of research-based principles," said one participant. "Through a clear, third-party, unbiased approach, WestEd helped us key in on a few policy questions and not be so scattered in focus."

As a result of the report's impact, WestEd led an unprecedented joint study session of the state board of education with members of the Senate and House Education Committees to discuss how the findings and recommendations fit into future policy. This was a pivotal opportunity for the legislative committees and the state board to "take another look at the most important education issue in Arizona," as one member put it, effectively heading off bills to dump the AIMS program.

Recently, the state board approved the superintendent's timeline for implementing the new AIMS program, voting to start with the class of 2006. This policy includes use of alternative assessments and requires schools to certify that their curricula are aligned with state standards at every grade level. While still a work in progress, major steps have now been taken toward an accountability system that is fair to students and helps to improve their performance.

In this work with the state of Arizona, WestEd is building on lessons learned from helping other states. Forging workable accountability systems is an inherently political process. "WestEd is nonpartisan," says Rabinowitz, "so we can get in there and work with many sides of an issue. We are not 'carrying water' for any particular side."

Winning the confidence of public officials means being well prepared, says Rabinowitz, "by having the policy and technical expertise in the first place. But it also means knowing when to apply research, how far to go with some things, and not overstepping your place."

This ongoing assistance will be vitally important as Arizona and other states align their assessment and accountability policies with new ESEA requirements. David Garcia, Arizona's assistant state superintendent, sees WestEd as "our research arm as we begin development of a long-range assessment plan with vision and cohesiveness," and knows that "WestEd staff will be highly instrumental in our success."

## REGIONAL CHALLENGES IN EDUCATION: WESTED'S KEY STRATEGIES AND SIGNS OF PROGRESS

**Problem: Lack of coherence in accountability systems that should align standards, instruction, and assessments at state and local levels.**

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Promote more coherent state and local policy through expert assistance, policy briefs, and convening.** After analyzing statewide survey data and conducting three town-hall meetings, WestEd developed recommendations that Arizona's state board of education is using to implement a more aligned and equitable graduation testing program.

**Promote use of data to drive continuous school improvement.** WestEd piloted a toolkit for data-driven decision making with 250 administrators. In related workshops, 350 school principals learned how to analyze student achievement results and identify content areas for improving instruction.

**Problem: Lack of strong leadership needed to improve low-performing schools.**

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Provide high-quality professional development for school and district leaders.** The Los Angeles County School Leadership Center is using WestEd's process to teach educators in 44 low-performing schools how to develop standards-based curriculum units.

**Help leaders learn core skills and promote new forms of distributed leadership.** WestEd's new multimedia publications articulate the skills instructional leaders need to guide standards-based practice, analyze student work, and form leadership teams.

**Problem: Need to upgrade teacher knowledge and skills, especially for English language learners.**

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Support the professional growth of teachers through all stages of their careers.** WestEd hosts Critical Topic Seminars for faculty and deans from teacher education programs throughout the region so they can explore new structures and practices.

**Develop multimedia tools to help teachers work more effectively with English language learners.** Working with the entire faculty at Chula Vista High School, WestEd is piloting teacher-training modules and coaching practices that will help teachers develop their students' academic language and content knowledge.

**Problem: Low achievement reaches beyond school walls—the communities that children live in need renewal.**

**STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS**

**Create a comprehensive approach that strengthens families, schools, and other community institutions.** WestEd facilitated school-wide literacy intervention at Mt. Diablo High School, provided resiliency training to after-school program staff, and helped create a community-based teen center to promote youth development.

**Develop training that will enhance effectiveness of local service agencies and outreach to families.** WestEd completed development of its five-day training institute to help home visitors and outreach workers serve families more effectively. Piloting of the training curriculum is underway for use in Early Head Start and other social service agencies.

# National Leadership Areas

The Regional Educational Laboratories do more than address education reform in their own geographic regions of the country—they also play a key role in making education research and information about school improvement efforts accessible at the national level. This is accomplished through each REL's national leadership area, where labs synthesize knowledge and findings from major research and development activities. This information is made widely accessible to practitioners, policymakers, and other researchers through various media, including annual conferences, forums, networks with professional research and development organizations and entities, and Web sites dedicated to the leadership areas. The RELs also create and disseminate tools and materials integrating the work of their national leadership areas and provide cross-laboratory training to make sure that research and development efforts extend beyond their regions to the rest of the nation.

The following pages describe the Regional Educational Laboratories' activities and accomplishments in their national leadership areas.

**AEL:** Unlocking Today's Technologies for Tomorrow's Students

**LAB:** Teaching Diverse Learners

**LSS:** Educational Leadership

**McREL:** Standards-Based Instructional Practice

**NCREL:** Technology

**NWREL:** Re-Engineering Schools for Improvement

**PREL:** Curriculum and Instruction Related to Reading and Language Mastery

**SEDL:** Family and Community Connections with Schools

**SERVE:** Expanded Learning Opportunities

**WestEd**: Assessment of Educational Achievement

## AEL: Unlocking Today's Technologies for Tomorrow's Students

When technologies are developed for the business sector, innovators can miss opportunities to make their products beneficial to learning, teaching, and school management as well. A major goal of the technology specialty area at AEL is to see that such opportunities are not missed.

Guided by a national board of advisors, AEL works with such high-tech partners as Virginia Tech, Digimarc Corporation, Knowledge Management Software, Inc., Interactive Software, Inc., Interactive Design and Development, AT&T Research Labs, and T.H.E. Institute to develop and test educational applications of emerging technologies, particularly those that appear in sectors outside of education. For example, AEL teamed with AT&T Research Labs to test an educational application of the PhoneChannel, originally designed for commercial use. Teachers in a rural school district successfully used it to "push" visual information to parents' televisions while talking with them on the phone, opening the door to its use in other rural areas where travel times make parent-teacher conferences difficult.

This story and others like it are featured in *INSIGHT*, an annual journal published by the specialty area to help school leaders and technology developers see the connection between current research and its practical application in education. The inaugural issue of *INSIGHT* was a finalist for EdPress's 2002 Distinguished Achievement Award.

Quarterly forums sponsored by the specialty area via its Soapbox Web site (www.iaete.org/soapbox) are designed to generate a wider discussion among educators, education researchers, members of the educational technology community, and other interested individuals.

The specialty area has also launched a free, Web-based tool, the K12 TCO Calculator (www.iaete.org/tco/), to help school leaders make well-informed decisions concerning technology expenditures.

By uniting leaders and visionaries, the specialty area demonstrates to both educators and technologists the potential rewards for innovation. Visit the specialty area's Web site at www.iaete.org.

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## LAB: A Shift in Focus for Teaching Diverse Learners

With the passage of the No Child Left Behind legislation, preparing diverse learners to succeed in school is more important than ever. But the focus of the work in this area has changed. Literacy and English language acquisition now take precedence over issues of bilingualism, and the LAB at Brown is aligning its work with the new national priorities.

"The responsibility of teaching diverse learners is on everyone's shoulders," says Maria Pacheco, director of Equity and Diversity programs at the LAB. Responding to this need, the LAB created *The Diversity Kit*, a research synthesis that offers insights on language acquisition and the effect of students' cultural backgrounds on the learning process. To convert last year's research into technical assistance in the field, the LAB will pilot *The Diversity Kit* in school districts from its region. The content of this kit is now available on the LAB's Teaching Diverse Learners Web site (www.lab.brown.edu/tdl), which provides teachers with resources for working with culturally and linguistically diverse students. The LAB is exploring ways in which the content of the site can be made available for easier use in the field.

The LAB focused its most recent national equity and diversity conference on ways to develop diverse learners' reading and writing skills and will address comprehensive school reform and diverse learners in its next research synthesis.

"The underpinnings of our work haven't changed," Pacheco says. "We still put the child at the center and recognize that what he or she brings to the classroom is critical to his or her success. We will bring that into the work we do on the national priorities."

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## LSS and Educational Leadership: Supporting Leaders as Models for Change

Educational leadership at LSS focuses on enhancing schools' abilities to produce high-achieving students. This focus necessitates that school leaders accept responsibility for student achievement and for promoting equal access to the highest quality learning environments for all students. However, LSS recognizes that improvement in schools can only take place when leaders are able to model the changes they are asking schools to make. "The task," according to Richard Elmore, professor of educational leadership at Harvard University, "is to develop practice around improvement. Only a change in practice produces a genuine change in norms and values."

Several LSS programs are integrally involved in helping educators convert low-performing schools into high-performing learning communities. These programs translate complex research studies into readily accessible guides for school leaders. One of these programs, the Application of the Knowledge Base on Improving Student Achievement to Selected School Districts, provides a study of six school districts that have made progress in closing the achievement gap between different ethnic and social groups of students. Two other programs, LSS Professional Development and Leadership for Research-Based and Data-Driven School Improvement, present a sequential series of seminars that train school leaders and aspirants to model effective classroom management practices.

In addition, the LSS National Invitational Conference Series provides annual opportunities for a wide variety of practitioners, policymakers, educators, and researchers to discuss current practice and leadership issues with experts in their field. This year's conference featured Joseph Murphy, author of *The Educational Leadership Challenge: Redefining Leadership for the 21st Century*.

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## McREL's Leadership in Standards-Based Education Continues Through National Dialogue

Standards-based education has been a focal point for McREL for more than a decade. In 2000, reflecting the laboratory's commitment to assisting schools in using standards in the classroom, McREL was awarded standards-based educational practice as its national leadership area.

As a natural outgrowth of that work, in November 2000 McREL launched the National Dialogue on Standards-Based Education, with the aim of creating the right conditions for educators, parents, community members, and policymakers to come together for a midcourse review of the standards-based reform movement. The first major event of the dialogue, held in Kansas City, Missouri in April 2001, brought together more than 100 students, parents, teachers, administrators, community members, and policymakers to learn what is and what is not working when it comes to standards-based reforms. This year's dialogue will focus on increasing the capacity of communities to develop homegrown solutions to issues facing their schools. In addition, McREL intends to develop a list of recommendations and resources based on the dialogue sessions.

To help communities create forums where people can participate in constructive dialogues about their expectations of schools—and how best to accomplish these goals—the National Dialogue will use a model of public engagement based on the National Issues Forum (NIF). The NIF is a 20-year-old, nationwide network of education and community organizations that deliberates about issues of civic importance. Like these discussions, McREL's dialogues will be structured discussions led by trained moderators. Nonpartisan background materials will be used to help frame the discussions by detailing several possible ways to ensure that standards-based reforms leave no child behind.

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## NCREL: Adding Value to Student Performance Through Technology

When Secretary of Education Rod Paige introduced the new Enhancing Education Through Technology program, he said, "It's not enough to have a computer and an Internet connection in the classroom if they are not turned on. It's not even enough to turn them on if they are not integrated into the curriculum, and it's pointless to integrate them into the curriculum if they don't add value to student performance."

As the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act puts a renewed emphasis on using technology to improve student achievement, the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory has positioned resources such as enGauge, the e-Learning Knowledge Base, and the National Educational Technology Conference to help educators nationwide make the most of their schools' technology plans and programs.

Since 2000, the enGauge Web site has continued to evolve and expand and now includes a technical assistance component. More than 400 schools and districts have taken advantage of the free resources offered on the enGauge Web site. New from NCREL this year is the e-Learning Knowledge Base, an online review of current literature about e-learning that considers the quality, efficiency, equity, and educational choices available to all of America's students.

The National Educational Technology Conference brings together key educators and policymakers on an annual basis to determine the technology trends that are transforming the educational landscape. The 2002 conference focused on identifying technology directives from NCLB and determining the best tools for implementation.

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## NWREL: Re-Engineering Schools for Student Success

Re-engineering teaches schools how to improve student performance by using education research to reshape rules, roles, and relationships. But for many schools, especially those most in need of improvement, finding and using high-quality research is a major challenge.

"National leadership in re-engineering brings together partnerships to support school systems—districts, schools, and communities—as they build capacity to turn intentions into reality," says Dr. Robert E. Blum, head of NWREL's re-engineering leadership work, which aims to provide schools with research-based products and assistance to realize school improvement goals.

New print and electronic products (www.nwrel.org/scpd/re-engineering) include research syntheses and depictions of schools achieving improved student learning.

NWREL has trained district leadership teams in re-engineering schools. The annual forum, "Enhancing Equity and Accountability Through Smaller Learning Communities in High School," assembled local educators, researchers, state reform leaders, reform model developers, regional laboratory staff, and others. The Houston Independent School District, serving more than 200,000 students, also joined in the dialogue with strategies, progress, and challenges related to reforming 36 high schools.

Forum organizers included Annenberg Institute for School Reform, Consortium for Policy Research in Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform, Council of Chief State School Officers, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, and the Houston Independent School District.

Re-engineering requires significant change and commitment to long-term improvement, not just minor tinkering with old routines. "Providing avenues for schools that have been successful at re-engineering to share their learning with those desiring this success is one way our national leadership is helping," says Blum.

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## PREL's Web Site Helps Put Reading First

The Regional Educational Laboratory at PREL launched its reading database Web site, earlyreading.info (www.earlyreading.info/rlm/search/index.htm), on April 1, coinciding with President Bush's official announcement informing U.S. educators about the opportunities offered by the Reading First initiative. The Web site provides online resources for educators and others charged with improving children's early reading achievement.

Objective 2.1 of the *U.S. Department of Education Strategic Plan* 2002-2007 is: "To ensure that all students read on grade level by the third grade."

The earlyreading.info Web site provides states and schools access to a variety of information resources focusing on early reading, such as effective reading instructional strategies, full-text documents of the most current reading research reports, and annotated listings of research-based reading Web sites.

Educators can find research based resources quickly and easily because of the user-friendly interface that allows them to be as specific or as broad as they would like in their search. Web site visitors choose from categories such as grade level (from pre-kindergarten through grade 3), reading component (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension), and/or information category (knowledge/research, materials/resources, strategies/activities, assessment, policy/standards, and family/community).

The resources included in the Web site have been reviewed by nationally recognized reading researchers and U.S. Department of Education staff to ensure alignment with the Reading First initiative. Drs. Elfrieda Hiebert and Michael Kamil are among the leading researchers involved in the resources review and/or other national leadership area activities.

PREL held a national invitational reading conference in fall 2002 that focused on emerging research issues in reading. PREL convened reading experts from universities, research centers, the Regional Educational Laboratory system, the Regional Comprehensive Assistance Center network, and other organizations to participate in this national event.

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## SEDL: Fostering Family and Community Connections with Schools to Increase Student Achievement

"There is an increasing national emphasis on research-based educational programs and practices that strengthen achievement," says Catherine Jordan, director of SEDL's National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools. "It is therefore critical that those who lead school, family, and community connection initiatives be familiar with research in the field in order to be credible and to lead successfully."

Jordan explains: "Programs are often centered around traditional parent involvement activities such as holding potluck suppers or having parents decorate bulletin boards—activities that do not lead to improved achievement. But research tells us what does increase achievement—activities such as teacher outreach to parents and workshops for parents on how to help their children at home, for example. Both of these are linked to higher reading and math scores for children."

The findings Jordan cites are included in the center's second annual synthesis of research, *New Waves of Evidence. The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement.*

Through a dissemination plan that includes the annual research synthesis, practical guides for educators, an online resource database, presentations at national conferences, videoconferences, and satellite broadcasts, the center is working to encourage increased family and community connections with schools in ways that support achievement and strengthen research in the field. The center is also networking with partner organizations such as the American Education Research Association's Family and Community Partnerships Special Interest Group, the Partnership for Family Involvement in Education, and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.

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## SERVE: Improving Student Learning Through Expanded Learning Opportunities

How can schools improve student learning and close the achievement gap? "By thinking beyond the regular school day," says Catherine Scott-Little, director of SERVE's Expanded Learning Opportunities project. SERVE is investigating the link between extra learning opportunities for children and improvements in student achievement. The project helps schools and other community organizations learn how to run quality programs and encourages them to offer expanded after-school learning and tutoring programs. Last year, SERVE's research focused on after-school programs, with a research synthesis that identified the methods and findings of after-school evaluations. The results suggested that these programs can be an important strategy to help students improve their grades and test scores, but that stronger evaluations are needed to document the link between effective after-school practices and student gains.

Recognizing that information on the operation and impact of these programs is critical to improvement, SERVE's work in 2002 aims to strengthen the quality of after-school evaluations. A national conference entitled "After-School Evaluations: Finding the Balance Between Accountability and Practicality" assembled national experts and evaluators to discuss practical ways in which evaluations can provide useful and credible data. A resource manual provided participants with an extensive array of information to use in their evaluation work.

"Strong evaluations of after-school programs are key to program improvements," Scott-Little explains. "These evaluations also provide information on how after-school programs can best be used to close the achievement gap. SERVE's work in this area provides the necessary resources to make the link between good programs and benefits for children and schools."

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## WestEd: Assessing Education Achievement

As educational leaders across the nation strive to put in place standards-based assessment and accountability systems, they confront a host of tough issues. "Many statewide tests are not technically adequate to perform all the tasks they're asked to," explains Stanley Rabinowitz, director of WestEd's Assessment and Standards Development Program.

WestEd's national leadership work in assessment focuses on this and other compelling issues faced by teachers, administrators, and policymakers: aligning assessments with standards, distributing the burden of assessment across grades and schools, and using technology as an assessment tool. The recent No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation raises the urgency of many of these issues.

Drawing on more than a decade of assistance to states such as California and Kentucky in their high-stakes student assessment systems, as well as ongoing work in more than 20 states, each quarter WestEd brings the National Assessment Work Group together to synthesize what is already known about key issues in a series of *Knowledge Briefs*, researches the most relevant knowledge gaps, and explores solutions to critical problems.

A key focus this year is the NCLB legislation. Through regional policy seminars, work groups, and briefs, WestEd is helping states work through the assessment and accountability requirements of the new law. Part of the challenge for states will be merging the successful components of past reform with the specific requirements of NCLB.

An annual assessment conference is co-hosted each fall with the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment. Other partners include state departments of education, universities, organizations such as the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Council for Measurement in Education, and the national research center, CRESST.

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# RELs collaborate on national issues

The Regional Educational Laboratory system provides information and assistance about a wide range of education topics to schools, districts, and communities nationwide. While each lab serves a specific region, they often collaborate on projects of national significance to make the most of their knowledge, experience, and expertise. In this way, the labs can develop products and services that benefit educators and students across the country. Recent collaborative efforts are described below.

**REL Network site**

This Web site brings together the most recent work of all ten laboratories. It describes the concept of the network as a national resource for all educators and provides a list of tasks common to all of the labs. These include identifying and promoting best practices and disseminating relevant and reliable research on the subject of education reform.

The site, which can be accessed at www.relnetwork.org, also includes summaries of each laboratory's national leadership area. The summaries explain the labs' goals within their targeted areas of need, the initiatives they will implement to address these issues, and the resources and products available for further information.

Because work at the labs is constantly evolving, the network site updates the latest headlines from each lab monthly. Information from previous months is archived and visitors to the site can search a central database that lists publications and products from all ten labs.

**Pulling Together: R&D resources for rural schools**

This site, accessible online at www.ncrel.org/rural/, consists of research-based resources produced by the REL network for educators working in rural areas or small schools. The articles, policy briefs, and other publications address a number of issues that are prevalent in rural districts and schools across the nation. Recently, the ten labs added reports and publications to the site that focus on how to assess kindergarten students, what life is like for U.S. schools within 100 miles of the Mexican border, closing the achievement gaps among diverse students in California elementary schools, and the effects of student mobility in rural communities.

This site also provides links to other national associations dealing with rural education as well as to archives of information such as the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools. Visitors can also go directly to the rural education component of each laboratory's Web site.

**RELs build prototype Web site: Charting a Course for School Improvement**

The regional educational laboratories have developed a prototype Web site, Charting a Course for School Improvement, to aid those working with schools and districts in addressing eight of the greatest challenges facing education:

- Assessment and accountability
- Educator quality
- Family and community
- Leadership
- School culture and organization
- Student diversity
- Supports and supplies
- Teaching and learning

The Web site shows not just what research says about these topics, but also how schools and districts can make improvements in each area. By featuring research on struggling schools—particularly findings about how some schools have made significant improvements in student performance—the site combines both classroom action and sound research.

In addition to offering a synthesis of information about research and proven educational practices, the site also directs users to valuable resources for supporting the work of school improvement determined to be effective by the RELs and other organizations working in the field.

Two portions of the site—Data Use and Standards—have been developed as a prototype. The preliminary design and content are currently undergoing field testing to determine whether the project will effectively meet the needs of its primary intended users—change agents who work with schools and districts to improve student, teacher, and school performance. Public access to Charting a Course for School Improvement will be announced via www.relnetwork.org during 2003.

# 2002 Performance Indicators

## Performance: RELs surpass target

**PRODUCTS/SERVICES**

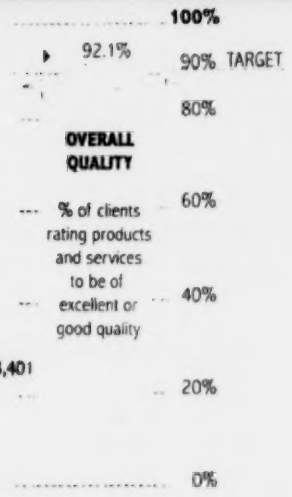
**STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT**

Products: 979,223
Services: 80,827

**DEVELOPMENT SITES**
206 Sites:
Administrators 1,055
Teachers 4,316
Parents 268

75% of sites focus on student achievement, with one quarter reporting an increase.

Web page views: 42,068,401




The current year represents new baseline data.

In 2001, the RELs started a new contract aimed at turning low-performing schools into high-performing learning communities. RELs have since engaged sites in R&D activities designed to capture "know-how," or procedural knowledge, on how these schools make systemic changes that stimulate improved instruction and increased student achievement. Each year, the RELs collect data on key indicators that mark progress toward this goal. A summary of last year's data follows.

Indicator 1.1 – Number of development sites

An increasing number of local or state sites will be engaged in collaborative development and demonstration of comprehensive reform-related efforts.

RELs partnered with 206 sites to learn how schools, districts, intermediate agencies, and states incorporate and sustain research-based strategies that lead to increased student achievement. 25% of the sites already report evidence of improved practice across a range of categories.

Indicator 1.2 – Student achievement

After three years of on-site development, sites will show increases in student achievement.

There is only one site that has worked intensively with a lab for more than three years; this site did not show an increase. Of the 12 schools in their third year, 11 (92%) reported evidence of increases in achievement.

Indicator 2.1 – Customer receipt of products and services

The circulation of products, receipt of services, and receipt of electronic material will increase annually from baseline levels.

RELs provide a wide array of technical assistance and field services; distribute tools, guides, and other materials via print and online resources; and hold forums, institutes, and regional and national conferences.

Indicator 2.2 – Quality of products and services

At least 90% of clients sampled will report laboratory products and services to be of high quality.

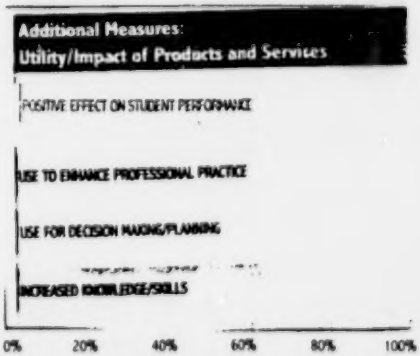
Over 90% of the RELs' constituents viewed the services and products that they received to be of high quality.

### Additional Measures

The RELs are collecting data on the impact of their work on policy. Baseline data indicate that REL staff made 133 refereed presentations at international, national, and state conferences; addressed 74 national and state policy audiences; and had 67 publications, including articles in refereed journals, books, book chapters, and practitioner journals.

Utility/Impact of Products and Services

REL clients reported that the services and products increased their knowledge and skills, were useful for decision making and planning, enhanced their professional practice, or had a positive effect on student performance (see chart).

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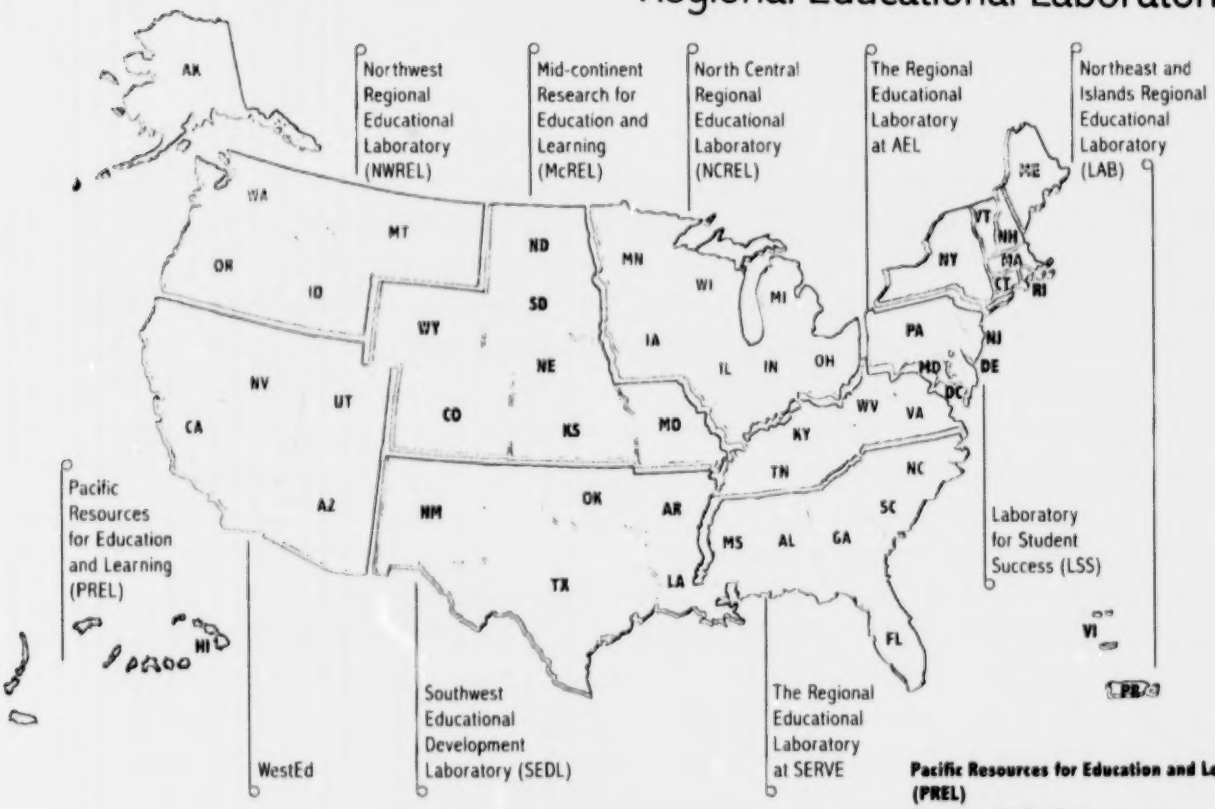
# Regional Educational Laboratories

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The REL system is a network of ten federally funded educational research and development laboratories, each serving a different geographic region of the United States, as well as the District of Columbia, the Pacific Island Territories, the Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico. Laboratory work is shaped by the special attributes, issues, challenges, and opportunities specific to the various regions, as well as by district, state, and national efforts to improve education for all children.

With support from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) and in collaboration with local and state educators, community members, and policymakers, the laboratories work to apply knowledge acquired through research and development to the challenges of education reform and improvement in their respective regions. In addition, each laboratory has a National Leadership Area, which makes knowledge about significant educational issues and related materials widely and readily available to a national audience of practitioners, policymakers, service providers, and researchers working to improve the nation's schools.

**U.S. Department of Education**
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